

Article

WORK, FREEDOM, AND RECIPROCITY IN WILLIAM MORRIS'S 'NEWS FROM NOWHERE'

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Abstract

Some have held that William Morris's idea of socialist freedom is a Trojan Horse for repressive tolerance, others that a celebration of physical violence is hidden within it. Contrary to these Cold-War-style narratives, this article vindicates Morris's vision of a communal system of fellowship and reciprocity as the conditions of any true freedom; we cannot be free all alone, but only together. The very bounds of reciprocity and fellowship make work, development, and freedom possible. Only in such a communal system could work become the true source of satisfaction, contentment and fulfilment, rather than of pain and compulsion, and afford every individual the possibility of developing his or her capacities to the highest point.

William Morris strove for a communist revolution that would especially transform *work*, not only through the abolition of wage-labour, but more broadly through the elimination of the division of labour between head and hand, man and woman, and town and country.¹ More specifically, he hoped for the supersession of the distinction between art and labour: every individual would have the possibility of engaging in many forms of work and of developing his or her capacities to the highest point. Once transfigured, work would become the true source of satisfaction, contentment and fulfilment, rather than being an object of pain and compulsion. The ugly world of capitalism would be cast aside in favour of communism – a world of beauty and joy. The (capitalist) “production of wealth” would be replaced by the (communist) “wealth of production” (Mészáros 1995, 529).

Like any celebrated artist or writer, Morris has long been the object of contending interpretations. As a communist, too, his words, works, and deeds have been received with incomprehension, rejection, or selective appropriation. As Michelle Weinroth (1996) argued, the 1930s provided a paradigmatic illustration of the split in Morris's identity between his politics and his aesthetics, as the Conservative establishment

¹ To cite the three fundamental forms of the division of labour Marx and Engels identified in *The German Ideology*.

appropriated him as a great English artist, while Communists hailed him as a great internationalist revolutionary. While such divisions have persisted (Weinroth 2015), the 21st century has seen the emergence of some new interpretations. Some reflect a trend to value originality above all else; in some cases, this has led to readings that not only break with established scholarship, but are poorly supported by evidence from Morris's work. Some new interpretations seek to discredit Morris's legacy as a revolutionary and a leading source of socialist renewal, by depicting him as a violent, irrationalist precursor of fascism or as a proto-Stalinist. A recurring feature in Morris criticism today as in the past is the tendency to reduce his thought to a set of paradoxes and antinomies. The following pages will illustrate this with reference to Morris's best-known book, *News from Nowhere*, by examining two recent critiques of Morris, those of Marcus Waithe (2006) and Ingrid Hanson (2013).

William Morris and News from Nowhere

Morris evoked a communist future in a number of speeches, essays, and articles, but most notably in *News from Nowhere*. The latter begins with a report by a "friend" about a meeting of the Socialist League at which the members discussed "what would happen on the Morrow of the Revolution," eventually expressing strong views about "the future of the fully-developed new society." As "there were six persons present," we are told, "consequently six sections of the party were represented, four of which had strong but divergent Anarchist opinions." One of the six eventually leaves the meeting in frustration and, sitting "in that vapour-bath of hurried and discontented humanity, a carriage of the underground railway," muses on the topic of the discussion and says to himself: "If I could but see a day of it [...] if I could but see it" (Morris 1890, 3-4). He goes home, falls asleep and awakens the next morning to find himself in a future England in which communism has been fully realized. Everyone finds fulfilment in creative work and service to others. The 19th-century "guest" spends several days in this new world, meets many people, and has several noteworthy and enlightening conversations, before being returned to his own time.

The narrative unfolds in three parts. In chapters 2 through 8, the time traveller and narrator discovers that he has somehow been transported to another time; like a tourist, a detached observer, he meets and speaks with a number of people, and is taken on a journey through the communist London of the future, all the while being introduced to the latter's social relations, ways, and fashions. In Chapters 9 through 19, he has a long and intense conversation with "Old Hammond," who explains "how the change came" after the 19th century and "how matters are managed" under communism. In the third part, chapters 21 through 31, the narrator journeys up the Thames for a few days with his new acquaintances. In the two first parts of the book, the narrator remains very much a

man of his own time catching glimpses of a new world; in the last part, he begins to engage with this new world and involve himself in it.

News from Nowhere is often regarded as the antithesis of the socialist utopia portrayed in Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. The product of a peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism, Bellamy's utopia, in Morris's words, "may be described as State Communism, worked by the very extreme of national centralisation":

though he *tells* us that every man is free to choose his occupation and that work is no burden to anyone, the *impression* which he produces is that of a huge standing army, tightly drilled, compelled by some mysterious fate to unceasing anxiety for the production of wares to satisfy every caprice, however wasteful and absurd, that may cast up amongst them (Morris 1889a).

For Morris, on the contrary, the common affairs of society must not be left to the state, but to the "conscious association" of the people: "the unit of administration to be small enough for every citizen to feel himself responsible for its details, and be interested in them" (Morris 1889a). In order to realize true freedom, communism must bring about not only "equality of condition," *but also "variety of life."* The indispensability of art as "the necessary expression and indispensable instrument of human happiness" must be recognized (Morris 1889a). Consequently, Morris's depiction of "Nowhere" emphasizes not only the absence of authority or private property, not only the complete equality of all, but especially the involvement of every individual in useful and creative work that transcends today's opposition between labour and fine art.

News from Nowhere may at a first reading come across as a utopian model of a communist society, but even then it is a rather odd account, much of it relating trips across London in a horse-drawn cart and up the Thames in a rowboat. Further readings reveal that it is less a visit to another world (after all, it is news from *nowhere*) than a *journey of and in political consciousness* and, as such, an invitation to the reader to join in moral and political struggle to change the world of Morris's age – and ours. *News from Nowhere* is really neither an essay nor a utopia, although it is frequently referred to as a utopia or a novel. Morris himself called it a *utopian romance*. Although it provides much food for thought about the outlines of an un-alienated existence, it does not say all that much about the economic and political "machinery" of communism. In commenting on Bellamy's book, Morris flags the danger of offering a reply to the question "How shall we live then?" noting that it is likely to put many readers off socialism. *News from Nowhere* does not so much offer a model of a future society as tell how it feels to him.²

² That same year, in fact, Morris delivered a speech titled "How shall we live then?" (Morris 1889b).

News from Nowhere is a *dream vision*, as the first and last chapters quite clearly state: “If I could but see a day of it [...] if I could but see it!”; “if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream” (Morris 1890, 4, 211). That it is a dream is made most clear by the way it is introduced, by the frequent hints that the narrator is soon going to wake up, by the way in which the processes and institutions underpinning the action are not spelled out, but remain vague. The dream character of the book is especially obvious from the fact that it begins at Morris’s own house in Hammersmith and ends at his other house, Kelmscott Manor, in Oxfordshire, and that the places, the people’s garb, the things they like and dislike, all refer to, and comment on, Morris’s own tastes and interests. This is not just any vision of communism; it is communism very much in the image of William Morris himself.

Utopias are important for inspiring faith in change (“If I could but see it...”). In real life, however, walking makes the path, as the saying goes. One always ends up somewhere else than one originally expected. Some will inevitably stand on the sidelines, as supposedly “objective” spectators, and presume to judge whether the path and destination are correct. Morris, on the contrary, believed in the importance of doing and dreaming, in the unity of theory and practice in the struggle to change the world. This is reflected in the design of *News from Nowhere* and of Morris’s late romances in general, in which the protagonist by way of involvement, engagement, and participation achieves an ever-deeper consciousness and understanding. Such a reading is predicated on the Morrisian (and Marxist) idea that humans make themselves and that work, as production and self-production, creation and self-creation, is the foundation of human existence and fulfilment.

Work is essentially a purposive activity (Lukács 1980), and may be surrounded by hopes and fears about what is to come. Yet, when we are immersed in it and truly focused on it, we are very much in the present moment, to the point that we can lose our sense of time passing. In this context, much has been made of the way in which some of the characters in *News from Nowhere* seem to live so much in the present, without giving much thought to the past or the future. The people of Nowhere live in the moment, finding fulfilment in the rhythms of their physical interaction with the world around them – rowing, mowing, growing things, cooking, building, sculpting, weaving – always in balance within themselves and with the world around them. As Stephen Arata puts it:

During the journey [up the Thames] Guest finally gives himself over, not just intellectually but physically, emotionally, and spiritually, to the utopian world he has landed in. Rowing up the river, he momentarily succeeds in producing in himself the state of consciousness appropriate to that utopia. [...] Guest learns to cultivate an emptiness that is not vacuity but instead a kind of balance or integration of body and psyche. His travelling companion [...] counsels Guest not to confuse this condition

with “mere dreamy musing.” She proposes a better definition: “repose amidst of energy” (Arata 2004, 194-195).

In contrast with “that vapour-bath of hurried and discontented humanity, a carriage of the underground railway,” the journey in the rowboat is slow, unhurried, and especially convivial: strangers meet, have interesting conversations, share food and drink, offer each other shelter for the night. Everyone has a goal, everything is purposeful, yet no one is in a rush, everything is in balance, like an exquisite dance.

Marcus Waithe’s Idea of Hospitality

Marcus Waithe begins *William Morris’s Utopia of Strangers* with the interesting thought that one can tell a great deal about a society by the way it receives and treats strangers. He then goes on to suggest that utopias, in the “Western tradition,” “are suspicious of strangers”: “The stranger who arrives at the gates of utopia is seen as posing a threat to the harmony achieved therein” (Waithe 2006, ix). He agrees with Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies* in holding that “the vast majority of [...] utopias [...] favour an ideal condition of stasis [that] implies successful exclusion of the outside world [and an emphasis] on perfectionism, on order, on social unity and splendid isolation” (Waithe 2006, ix-x). *News from Nowhere*, however, is among the exceptions; thus, “his legacy provides the scholar with an opportunity to analyse the particular without losing conceptual or historical breadth” (Waithe 2006, x). Waithe defines the aim of his book as “to explore the development and character of Morris’s ‘utopia of strangers,’ to identify its roots and to determine the extent of its capacity for accommodating difference” (Waithe 2006, xi).

Much of *William Morris’s Utopia of Strangers* is devoted to Morris’s early writings and to romances such as *The House of the Wolfings*, *The Roots of the Mountain*, and *A Dream of John Ball*. Waithe has a number of interesting and worthwhile things to say about these works. For example, he discusses the connection between the presentation of ancient Germanic societies in Lewis Morgan’s *Ancient Society* and Engels’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, and Morris’s portrayal of those societies in *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*. Waithe skilfully deploys the concept of hospitality to bring to the fore Morris’s dialectical grasp of how the development of those societies also brought about their transformation and evolution into class societies.

Waithe’s project is not, however, merely to examine Morris’s various writings in general, but to analyze Morris’s ‘utopia,’ i.e., *News from Nowhere*. He reviews some of the secondary literature that identifies *News from Nowhere* as a “libertarian” utopia,

acknowledges that “much evidence exists to support such a reading” and claims not to dispute it; yet he emphasizes that “in certain respects, *Nowhere* remains typically utopian, that it constitutes a vision of happiness achieved by means of an act of exclusion” (Waithe 2006, 144). Alluding to “the crimes of fascism and communism,” he suggests that “the subtitle of *News from Nowhere* – ‘a utopian romance’ – invokes a literary and political tradition now so controversial as to have an unavoidable bearing on the reception of Morris’s vision.” Allowing that *News from Nowhere* is not necessarily “a prototype for totalitarian politics,” Waithe nonetheless insists that “consideration of these issues is essential if one is to appreciate the background against which claims for Morris’s unique status as a utopist are made” (Waithe 2006, 145). This appears to mean that all utopian writings in the socialist tradition must be considered in the light of “the crimes of fascism and communism,” presumably because some utopian dimensions are associated with those monstrous regimes. How, one may ask, is such guilt by association different from saying that while not all Catholics are pedophiles, yet each must be viewed in the light of the fact that some were; or again that while not all liberals are slave-owners, yet in considering the words and actions of each of them, we must bear in mind that some liberals were? Waithe states that socialism must, if it succeeds, turn into totalitarianism and that Morris only escaped being an “apologist” for totalitarianism, because he was politically defeated in the British socialist movement:

It would now be hard to argue that [Herbert] Spencer was wrong in predicting that socialism would foster a dangerous aggregation of state power. In Soviet Russia, state socialism presided over class liquidation, forced collectivization, the gulag system of labour camps and a police state whose chief instruments were denunciation, deportation and terror. Morris defends socialism in the abstract, conflating his own suspicion of engineered solutions to social problems with the wider socialist project in the hope that policy discussions, then ongoing, would be decided his way. It is precisely because he misread the flow of events, and failed to win the argument, that he avoids acting as an apologist for totalitarian politics (Waithe 2006, 149).

Beyond asserting this arcane teleology, Waithe does not in fact delve into the political-theoretical issues of a revolutionary transition. Instead, he sets out to show that Morris’s “utopia” in *News from Nowhere* is not as libertarian as some people claim.

To be sure, *News from Nowhere* forms part of an ongoing argument with the “libertarian” anarchists of the Socialist League, who did not seem to believe in the necessity of any form of social regulation over the individual (Morris 1889c). Morris by contrast imagined communism as a form of society in which major decisions that affected

the many would be reached *collectively*, but in which there would be the greatest possible freedom of the individual (Morris 1889c). Waithe himself appears to recognize this:

“It would [...] be a mistake to interpret the apparent openness of Nowhere, and Morris’s enthusiasm for certain aspects of the anarchists’ programme – such as communes, decentralization, regionalism – as an indication that he intended the freedom of his utopians to go entirely unrestricted. In Nowhere there is no government to enforce social behaviour, but it does not follow that the individual pursues life in a social vacuum devoid of necessity and responsibility” (Waithe 2006, 159).

Although Morris depicts Nowhere as a world in which the state, the market, religion, and marriage have all disappeared, individuals are still bound by obligations to each other. These take the form of a system of generalized reciprocity, a gift economy, in which each, as an individual, gives herself or himself completely to the whole community, but in which each, as a member of the latter, receives each individual, and in which each remains free and equal, while also being one with all the other members (Browne 2015).

Waithe, however, speaks of “the gift of freedom” in Morris’s vision of communism as a “Trojan Horse” for “a different kind of regulation” (Waithe 2006, 156). Morris’s characters “tolerate” those who are different, the dissenters, but it is a form of *repressive* tolerance according to Waithe. However, one may ask why this must be a matter of *tolerance*, let alone of a repressive sort. It would be no less reasonable to regard it as the acceptance and enjoyment of the other’s gift – a gift of difference, diversity, individuality.

When “Guest” appears in Nowhere, he is almost like a newborn, like a stranger or a refugee thrown upon a new shore.³ As such, he is completely vulnerable, dependent on the goodwill of his hosts for everything. His interaction with them is quite unlike that which prevailed at the League, as described at the beginning of the book, where no one listened to anyone else. Nowhere is no place of “tolerance” (i.e., of “putting up with”), as Waithe puts it; on the contrary, it is a world of “good manners” (Holzman 1984, 595), i.e., rules of interaction, but not of repression. Respecting the freedom of others to speak as they wish is the right thing to do, but it also serves each person’s self-interest, because each person respects the freedom of others.

³ Guest’s first act is to go for a swim in the Thames, stripping off all of his clothes. It is during this baptism that he becomes aware, on seeing the built landscape around him, that things are no longer as they were (in particular, and most symbolically, he glimpses a magnificent bridge that was not part of the London of his time). A boatman from this new world, Dick, helps him out of the water and looks after him – midwife, nurse, teacher, friend. Guest’s passage back to his own reality at the end of the book only comes just after he has swum in the Thames again, appropriately enough with Dick.

In order to grasp what is really different about Nowhere, one needs to go beyond “hospitality,” to focus on *what is given* in Nowhere generally, and not only on what is given to that very odd stranger, “Guest.” To be sure, the inhabitants of “Nowhere” imagined by Morris are pleased to offer each other hospitality; they do not only share the resources of their society in a general way, they are happy to labour for each other in making and giving things to others singly and to the community at large. However, what distinguishes the communal system of Nowhere is the circulation of *opportunity* – opportunity to speak, to act, to create: each gives to others opportunities to work (Browne 2015, 201ff.). There are many examples of this in the book (for example, Dick gives such an opportunity to Bob, the weaver from Yorkshire, right in Chapter Two); Guest in turn gives the Nowherians all kinds of opportunities to do things for him, to explain things to him, and to reflect on their world and their ways, and how these came about. Because he imagines Nowhere as founded primarily on the exchange of *activities*, more than on goods, the key thing for Morris is not hospitality so much as *cooperation*, *creative work* more than consumption, *doing* more than having.⁴

Revolutionary communist thought does, to be sure, have a real aporia that Waithe might have explored, but did not: how to realize the withering away of the state, given the state’s seemingly inevitable role in the transition from capitalism to socialism? How can the forces of revolution change society and maintain those gains in the face of external enemies (domestic classes and foreign states)? And how can socialist state power not remain an essential condition of the transition, since the people will not be able overnight to shed their *habitus* produced over many generations by the capitalist division of labour, and since the economic and political divisions of labour will not be overcome all at once either?

The young Lukács raised this question of state power in a 1919 essay, “The Role of Morality in Communist Production” (Lukács 1919; Mészáros 1978). In it, he evokes the imperative of developing the productive forces following the seizure of state power by the revolutionaries. He notes that the proletariat would need to have a very high level of political consciousness in order voluntarily to make the sacrifice of working very hard to develop the productive forces, given that it might not enjoy the fruits of its labour for a

⁴ For this reason, too, it is difficult to follow Waithe in regarding “Morris’s Nowhere as a primitive economy of sorts” (Waithe 2006, 157). Earlier in his book, Waithe outlined Morris’s excellent grasp of the historical dialectic of modes of production; why then, as here, conflate Morris’s vision of fully developed post-capitalist communism with *primitive communism*? Apparently, Waithe does so because he observes that Nowhere has a gift economy, because he draws on Marcel Mauss’s famous essay on the gift, which discusses ancient and so-called primitive gift economies, and because Morris not only had a deep knowledge of ancient societies and their social institutions, but also depicted such societies in some of his romances (which Waithe discusses in his book). However, there is nothing “primitive” about the communal system imagined by Morris in Nowhere, with its maximization of individual freedom and its radical equality (Mineo 1999).

time. Echoing Rousseau's notorious line in the *Social Contract* (1987, 101-102) that whosoever would refuse to obey the general will would be forced "to be free" by the whole of the political community, he warns that the state might have to step in and compel the proletariat to work in the absence of such a high level of political consciousness.

Clearly, the type of society imagined by Morris in *News from Nowhere* would require the highest level of communist morality. Unlike the young Lukács of "The Role of Morality in Communist Production," Morris does not, however, regard this morality as having to exist in an institutional vacuum, in which the only options would be autonomy founded on rational consciousness or heteronomy rooted in the latter's absence. As Morris imagines communism, putting those highest values of communist morality into practice would have to have become *habitual*, second nature; yet this morality is not reified, as almost every individual in *News from Nowhere*, when called upon to do so, seems to be able to explain the rational moral basis of Nowhere's habits and customs.

As Jayne Hildebrand has argued, *habit* is a crucial dimension of the communal system as Morris conceived it. She shows how Morris opposes habit to the liberal concept of the autonomous, rational individual. Habit provides "a commonly shared level of experience – a somatic guarantee of the 'condition of equality' that is the basis of a communist society" (Hildebrand 2011, 13). Hildebrand perceptively suggests that such habit does not reduce individual activity to some dull routine, but "opens up a field of variation that manifests itself in the diversity and beauty of the labourers' productions and, more subtly, in the pleasure they take in their labour" (Hildebrand 2011, 16). This transforms and enhances the worker's body and capacities no less than work under capitalism stunts them by confining them to specific forms and patterns. The habits developed in the communal system empower individuals to engage in "infinitely complex and varied kinds of labour," just as musicians' training can make possible "unthinkably complex and beautiful improvisations" (Hildebrand 2011, 17). Crucially, such a situation could only come into being after a lengthy historical transition period, during which the transformation of the *habitat* and *habitus* would occur, giving rise eventually to new habits, "spontaneous," but non-reified, forms of thought and action rooted in long years of a revolutionary people working upon itself.

As István Mészáros (1978, 1986) has pointed out, such new habits would not be possible immediately following a seizure of state power by revolutionary forces. A state would continue to exist for a long time. Hence the problem: how to prevent the existence of such a state not only from curtailing individual freedom, but also from generating new forms of class domination and exploitation – and thus blocking the transition to the higher form of communism of which Morris dreamed? To state the problem is not to admit that it cannot be solved, that oppressive state forms are universal and inescapable. It is not to reduce the possible range of post-revolutionary societies to the examples of the Soviet Union or the China of the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution,

although those cases must be assessed thoroughly. It is, however, to recognize the problematic and lengthy nature of any post-capitalist transition.

Had *News from Nowhere* been meant to be a utopia in the conventional sense, i.e., the sketch of an ideal society, one might well wish that it said more about such a transition and about “how matters are managed”⁵ under communism. However, *News from Nowhere* is not such a utopia. It is utopian, in the sense that it expresses Morris’s dream, and aims to awaken the reader to consciousness and action. In the light of this, it is scarcely surprising that the book dwells much more on criticism of the 19th century and projections of Morris’s ideas about work, art, and beauty (that of people, landscape, architecture, and ornament). The politics in *News from Nowhere* is not so much in “Nowhere” as in Morris’s intention to draw us deeper and deeper into his desire of a better world till, like Guest, we wish to see it and live it. As Hildebrand (2011, 13) puts it: “Hammond invites Guest to habituate himself to life in Nowhere by becoming a co-participant in this unconscious social fabric.” In inviting the reader into his book, Morris is opening the door to a kind of habituation via participation in his dream of a place that does not, but ought to, exist.

It is important to bear in mind the *dialectical* unfolding of Morris’s narrative. The discussion of coordination and regulation of society comes up in Chapter 14, i.e., in the second part of *News from Nowhere*, when “Guest” still has a *detached* relationship to Nowhere; he has not yet truly penetrated it, nor has it yet penetrated him. At that point in the book, such issues remain *theoretical*. In the final part of the book, however, Guest’s relationship to the issue is no longer theoretical, but *practical*, because he has transcended his detachment and become *actively involved* in Nowhere. He has begun living in the moment, in that state of “repose amidst of energy” evoked earlier. Yet, despite embracing Nowhere and everything about it willingly and completely, he is never in that state of repose fully: he is constantly engaged in a “never-ending contrast between the past and the present.” As Guest is the witness of Nowhere with which Morris has provided us, he cannot be wholly of Nowhere, but must always remain of the 19th-century. Symbolically, he cannot partake of the feast in the last chapter, but must return to our present reality and struggle to *effect* the real transition, as must we, rather than merely dream of it. And this, indeed, is surely one of the points here, in the spirit of the Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach: political theory can shed light on the difficulties and contradictions of revolutionary change, but only praxis can overcome them.

Ingrid Hanson and the Uses of Violence

In her *William Morris and the Uses of Violence*, Ingrid Hanson reads Morris’s writings by focusing on his characters’ physical immersion in and involvement with their

⁵ The title of Chapter 14 of *News from Nowhere*.

world. However, instead of emphasizing the theme of *work*, she claims that a spectre of excessive, brutal, and sexualized *violence* lurks beneath the veneer of beauty, peace, and harmony in William Morris's art and vision of communism (Hanson 2013). Morris, she states, was "committed" to violence as a necessary, purifying element in the development of a communist masculinity (Hanson 2013, 163). On this view, Morris emerges as a man with a "troubling preoccupation with violence as means of establishing and expressing identity" (Hanson 2013, xxi). Even the "epoch of rest" of Morris's future peaceful, egalitarian communist society in *News from Nowhere* turns out in Hanson's account to be a "phallogocratic" society, marked by an undercurrent of sexual violence (Hanson 2013, 164). Overall, the book displays in her eyes a "commitment to morally malleable violence and the cleansing potential of absolute destruction," its dream of a utopian future only possible on the basis of "cataclysmic violence" (Hanson 2013, 165).

Hanson's starting point is the observation that depictions of hand-to-hand combat and medieval-style warfare are frequent in Morris's work, from his early poetry and stories to his late romances. She questions the reason for this and finds it in Morris's refusal of "advanced civilization," i.e., the modern liberal world in which violence has been repressed in the everyday life of its citizens and the state officially has the monopoly of its legitimate exercise: "The violence of combat [...] suggests the power of the body in battle to effect change and mediate meaning. It is this power that Morris explores, idealizes, interrogates and troublingly affirms..." (Hanson 2013, 30).

Hanson's interpretation of Morris is itself troubling, because her claims about his "idealization" of violent combat become a Procrustean bed in which she forces his various texts and utterances. Thus, she interprets all of Morris's references to struggle, fighting or force as expressions of physical violence, although the struggle of the workers by no means always involves the latter, except perhaps in bourgeois fears of striking workers. Indeed, the key aspect of the struggle is not physical, but intellectual and emotional: it is the struggle against the ideologies and ingrained habits of life under capitalism.

Hanson does not really allow for Morris's own transformation over the course of his life, from romantic anti-capitalist radical to revolutionary communist, a shift evident in the increasing maturity of his political judgement and the deepening sharpness of his strategic analyses. While scenes of men fighting with swords and spears do not disappear from his fictional writings even in his socialist phase (something of which Hanson makes much), they are not the truly important processes or moments of struggle. Instead, the later romances Hanson does not discuss⁶ are tales in which the protagonists must solve

⁶ She reviews Morris's early short stories and poetry, his version of the saga of Sigurd the Volsung, his 'teutonic' romances *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*, as well as *The Pilgrims of Hope*, *A Dream of John Ball*, and *News from Nowhere*. She does not discuss *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, *The Wood Beyond the World*, *The Well at the World's End*, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* or *The Sundering Flood*.

problems, learn, and mature in situations in which only reason, speech, and moral judgement, not physical violence, lead to the correct course of action.⁷

Hanson reads violence into situations where there frankly is none. For example, she claims that Morris offers “the detailed presentation of cataclysmic ‘change’” in *News from Nowhere* and that this “demonstrates his commitment to acts of war”: “His focus on the process of battle as the bearer of change suggests that it forms part of the essential physical transformation of the people from dull and quiescent to active and capable of establishing a new world” (Hanson 2013, 158).

To be sure, *News from Nowhere* contains a reference to the transition from capitalism to communism as a process set in motion by a revolution described as “bitter war, till hope and pleasure put an end to it,” a war involving “actual fighting with weapons,” as well as “strikes and lockouts and starvation” (Morris 1890, 104). The trouble with Hanson’s account is that William Morris *did not* offer any “detailed presentation of cataclysmic change” or of revolutionary violence in *News from Nowhere*. The *only* actual depictions of organized or collective violence in the entire book concern the *counter-revolutionary* violence of the state. There is a description of peaceful demonstrations repressed by the police, involving the usual brutalization of demonstrators and scuffles as the latter resist; in one case, though, a few policemen are “crushed to death in the throng” during a rally attended by huge masses of people (Morris 1890, 111). In another episode, armed troops machine-gun a virtually defenceless crowd of people in Trafalgar Square, killing “between one and two thousand” (Morris 1890, 117).⁸ In Morris’s account, this act of savagery is not followed by acts of violent revenge by the workers; instead, some days later, there is a general strike – an act of struggle, an exercise of force, but scarcely of physical violence. Finally, *News from Nowhere* suggests: “all historians are agreed that there never was a war in which there was so much destruction of wares, and instruments for making them as in this civil war” (Morris 1890, 130). In other words, Morris does imagine a revolution in which there is massive destruction of private property. As he was a communist, this is scarcely surprising, but it is hardly the same as attributing to him a belief in “cataclysmic violence” in the form of killing and maiming.⁹ Morris also wrote:

I do not believe that our end will be gained by open war; for the executive will be too strong for even an attempt at such a thing to be made until the

⁷ For a synoptic survey of Morris’s views on violence throughout his life, see Boos 2015.

⁸ This episode clearly harkens back to the savage police attacks on workers in Trafalgar Square on Bloody Sunday (13 November 1887) – that Morris himself witnessed – and to the massacre of the Communards in 1871.

⁹ Morris is also at pains to stress that the revolutionaries chose to preserve many of the buildings erected before the “Change” (Morris 1890, 32-33). The passage in question is a sly wink at the reader, because it mentions the role of a “queer antiquarian society,” a reference to the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings of which Morris himself was a co-founder in 1877.

change has gone so far that it will be *too weak* to dare to attack the people by means of physical violence. What we have to do first is to make Socialists. That we shall always have to do till the change is come and could only do it by preaching (Morris n.d.).¹⁰

Along with other writings of the 1880s and 1890s, this passage speaks to Morris's strategic, rather than psychological, attitude toward violence, his understanding that the agents and forms of violence depend on the levels of class consciousness and the balance of class forces in the given conjuncture. It is not that he desires or is "committed" to violence, but that resistance and revolution are necessary to put an end to the destructive effects of capitalism on individuals and society as a whole – and that means opposing and ultimately abolishing the state. Hanson herself quotes Morris as declaring: "I have a religious hatred to all war and violence." She adds: "Violence is not something to be sought, but must be readily embraced when thrust upon the people by history or progress" (Hanson 2013, 98, 99). That history may force difficult choices on classes and individuals is indeed Morris's point.

Hanson disapproves of revolution, preferring peaceful, piecemeal reforms, perhaps especially ones that individuals can accomplish on their own:

While socialists such as Edward Carpenter or George Bernard Shaw demonstrated their commitment to the healing of society through attention to the health of the body by taking up vegetarianism, clothing reform or meditation, Morris demonstrates his commitment to the transhistorical, despiritualized sacrificial body by his sensual evocation of battle and its effects on the body and the mind (Hanson 2013, 137).

Like Waithe, Hanson cites that paragon of Cold-War anti-communism, Karl Popper, and invokes "the failure of totalizing ideologies in the West":

Yet for contemporary readers, no less than for those coming to *News from Nowhere* in the aftermath of the failure of totalizing ideologies in the West, and in the midst of an international political climate shaped by charged competing ideologies of sacrifice in the twenty-first century, this utopia fails to offer readers a compelling alternative to violence. It invites us to consider the political struggles of the present as negligible in the light of

¹⁰ Hanson (2013, 135) in fact quotes the following line from this passage: "I do not believe that our end will be gained by open war." However, she dismisses it in effect as something written toward the very end of Morris's life and does not let it deflect her from her insistence on Morris's attachment to the ideal of redemption through physical violence.

future rewards, but in doing so powerfully suggests the necessity of violence in engendering and enjoying peace and wholeness (Hanson 2013, 165).

On this view, Morris believed that the prospect of communism justified any suffering brought about by violence in the present; his vision of equality and freedom looks shabby in the light of this “commitment” to violence. The problem with this is that there is no evidence that Morris held such cavalier attitudes in regard to the sufferings caused by war.¹¹ It is important to add, however, that Morris believed that “Commercial War,” i.e., capitalist competition and exploitation, caused colossal suffering, that the only morally defensible course of action was to try to overthrow it, and that any violence associated with revolution had to be seen in the light of the violence of life under capitalism. In Morris’s eyes, only communism offered “a compelling alternative to violence” – the structural violence of capitalism, but also the physical violence the latter inflicts on human beings and their environment: sick and stunted minds and bodies, hunger, poverty, waste, ugliness.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the core of Morris’s entire thought and work is the project of transforming art and labour, of overcoming their opposition by realizing a higher synthesis in which each and everyone can achieve fulfilment in non-alienated labour that produces useful and beautiful objects, and fills the world with beauty. Hanson essentially dismisses this by associating Morris’s concept of work with killing, indeed with genocide:

By focusing on the physical, Morris transforms war into work or even play, making battle itself pleasurable [...] Work and play go together in these texts; they are not opposites [...] Rather, both are continuous aspects of the same thing: the application of physical labour and the use of skill for the accomplishment of an end, whose biproduct [sic] is physical pleasure (Hanson 2013, 120).

In such passages, Hanson accuses Morris of naturalizing and sanitizing violent combat, despite his criticism of Victorian mechanized warfare (Hanson 2013, 122ff.). Ultimately,

¹¹ Hanson’s book concludes with the claim that “the romance of [Morris’s] tales of violence has also formed part of a different set of cultural influences, bolstering a language of mingled chivalry, sacrifice and manly violence [...] even drawing some of the adherents of socialist ideals of beauty, health and historical Teutonic manhood into an admiration for fascism and giving others a rationale for war” (Hanson 2013, 168). By including Morris in a vague “set of cultural influences,” Hanson finds him guilty by association with fascists – people with whom he never associated and whose ideas and actions would have been anathema to him.

she writes that Morris likens the “act of killing” to craft in the sense of “skilful, creative manual work.” She adds: “Given Morris’s extensive theorizing of work as an expression of both personhood and environment, this idea of work normalizes and indeed celebrates killing.” She sees in this a chilling connection to the Holocaust or the 1994 Rwandan genocide: “it is an idea with the potential for a less benign interpretation, an idea that lurks behind the methodical work of the Nazi death camps, or the enthusiastic thoroughness of the Hutu *génocidaires* in Rwanda” (Hanson 2013, 125).

Given Morris’s lifelong involvement in art and craft, his passionate interest in the making of things and the development of skill, how could he not have understood that fighting can also involve skill? How many men and women today learn martial arts in order to keep fit and to practice self-defence? It would also have been strange had Morris not understood the allure of scenes of hand-to-hand combat to the readers of fiction. In our time, mixed martial arts, kung fu and ‘superhero’ movies, video games, and a host of other media featuring such scenarios of combat are huge industries raking in billions of dollars and catering to hundreds of millions of consumers worldwide. The fact that so many people find such things thrilling in no way means that they are “committed” to violence or likely to inflict it on others, let alone participate in genocide. The scenes in Morris’s fictions that so “trouble” Ingrid Hanson seem quaint and naïve in comparison with things that are a few clicks away in anyone’s computer or television set. In short, linking Morris to Stalinism, the Holocaust, and the genocide in Rwanda, is farfetched and fanciful to say the least.

Conclusion

Marcus Waithe’s study of Morris bears the hallmarks of a scholarly treatise: much careful analysis based on extensive research and consideration of divergent points of view. Even the criticism of *News from Nowhere* discussed here is presented as half of a balanced presentation that also makes the case for the more common “libertarian” reading of the book. Waithe’s liberalism is thus not only apparent in his comments about socialism, but also in his seeming even-handedness. Having said this, one must also bear in mind that to assert: “on the one hand, there is this view, on the other hand there is that one,” may appear even-handed, while actually being a failure to grasp the dialectic at the heart of the matter. Moreover, to pit against each other two opposing, but weak cases (Morris the libertarian vs Morris the proto-Stalinist), does not shed much light on Morris’s work.

In focusing on how a community deals with a stranger, Waithe is certainly raising an issue of importance, and never more so than now as these lines are being written. But he is also framing in a particular way the question of what a society and freedom are. The *stranger* very much corresponds to classical liberalism’s imagination of the individual: a

mature, fully developed, *free* man, possibly transported to a new environment, having to find non-violent, profitable ways to relate to other individuals, while remaining as unbounded as possible by them.

In Waithe's presentation, the alternatives in the interpretation of life in Nowhere appear to be *freedom*, understood as the complete absence of any external constraint, and *regulation*, defined as repression of the individual by community pressure. By opposing a "libertarian" reading of *News from Nowhere* to one that emphasizes "regulation," Waithe once again betrays his liberal position: either one is free or one is not – by contrast with Morris's position that only the bonds of collectivity make us free. For Morris, true freedom is unthinkable outside of fellowship (Browne 2015, 207-208): we cannot be free all alone, but only together. The very boundedness of living with others also makes action, development, and fulfilment possible.

As for Ingrid Hanson, whether it was her conscious objective or not, it is hard not to regard what she has done with Morris as yet another moment in a century-old struggle to beat down and discredit Morris's revolutionary project. In the process, she downplays "Commercial war," i.e., the structural violence of capitalism, and of course *state violence*, making it seem that those who aspire to collective emancipation by way of total social transformation are the real authors of violence – as though the 19th and 20th centuries had not shown that states typically and regularly respond to movements for liberation and reform with extraordinary and unfathomable brutality; as though all attempts to build socialist societies over the last 150 years have not been hindered or hampered by counter-revolutionary state violence. That, and not Morris's imagination, is the real barrier to a world of equality and freedom.

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